

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, May 31, 1989

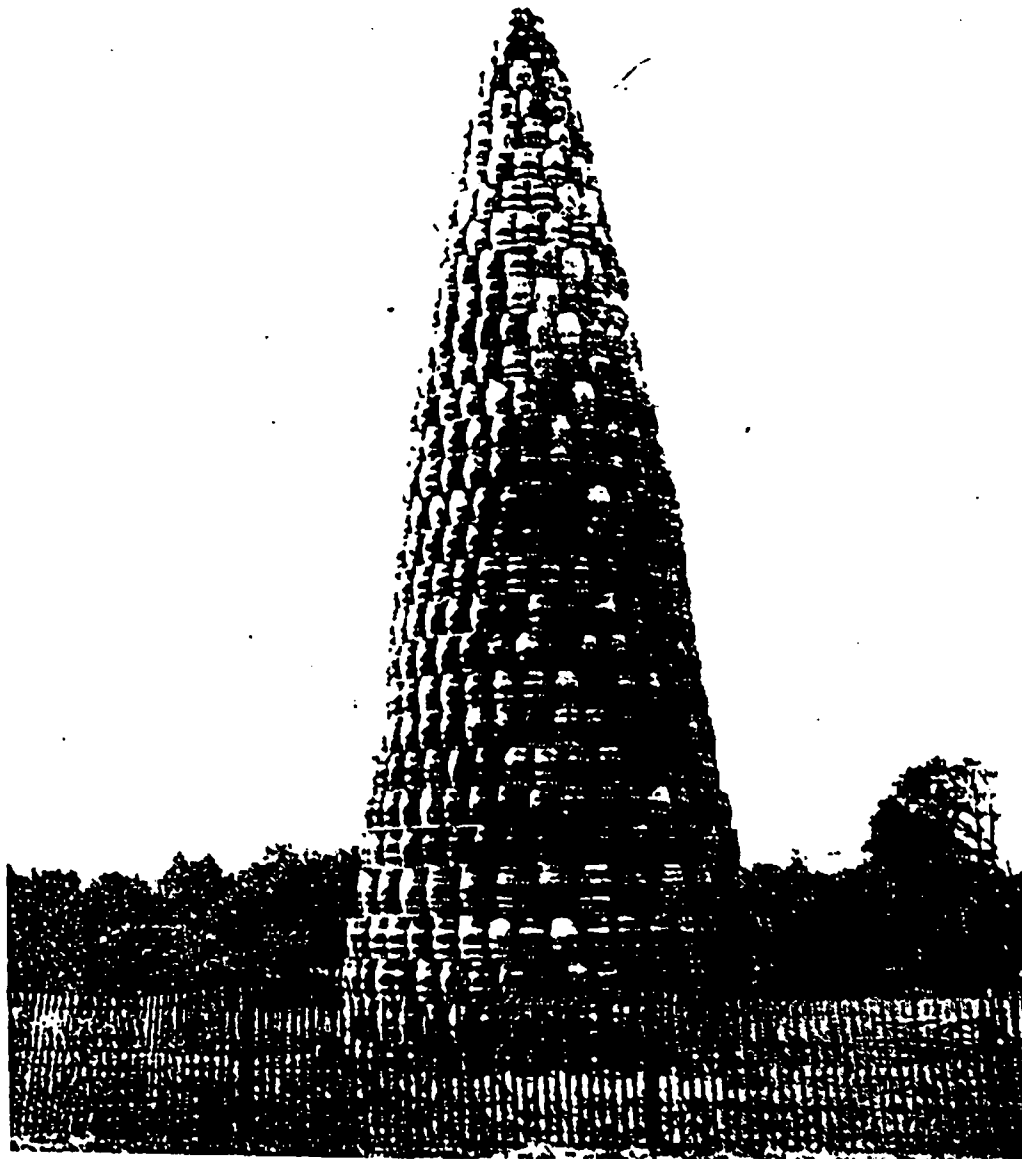
The Story of Duxbury's 4th of July Celebrations

By The Rev. Canon Robert Merry

Duxbury Clipper

Section 2

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exuberance of Duxbury's young men along some more reasonable lines. The fire department had by now assumed a prominence in Duxbury's life that topped all other groups except the American Legionnaires who now joined forces with them. So it is historically correct to have fire companies lead the parade today. Furthermore, the #1 Fire Engine House had a band known for its musical prowess all up and down the South Shore. So much so they were asked to lead the parade over the Sagamore Bridge at its dedication in 1935. This band had to have another parade, so Duxbury's July 4th parade began. Whether the bonfire came with it no one seems to recall, but it was very close. Material for burning was easily acquired from the abandoned Old Colony Railroad bed, and many hearts and hopes were lifted when these great days began.

The parade and bonfire became the staples of the celebration at Hall's Corner and ending at Train Field with picnic lunches and sports and awards and usually a firemen's muster and a baseball game. Then with the building of the intermediate school the parade route was reversed, now beginning at Train Field and ending at town property at Chandler St. Field. This continued for a few years with the parade as usual and the evening bonfire here near the geographical center of town. Then with the construction of Chandler St. school, the locale had to be changed and for several years the parade was reversed, marshalling the floats at Train Field and ending them now at the Bay Farm property next to the Kingston border. The Bay Farm site proved to be a welcome spot with its access to the bay and its wide open field with lots of parking space. Something new was also added at the suggestion of Walter Prince, who had taken over town leadership, and that was a ferris wheel, roller coaster, merry-go-round, and games of skill and chance in great abundance. I remember attending this event which must have brought some needed revenue into the town when it was run by local folks. But as the years rolled on and more and more gambling dens appeared out of town, people gradually took over the reins and "Duxbury Days" which had begun as an innocent past time took on the nature of a county fair that usurped the parade in importance. Then a tragic accident took place injuring many and town meeting decided it had really run its course. Plus the fact that the state had placed a ban on all burning in the open and so the bonfire itself, a great drawing card, had to go. This plus the elimination of public sale of fireworks made a very different kind of July 4th celebration.

One person who was really pleased over these eliminations was Howard Blanchard, for a dozen years Duxbury's fire chief and a life-long firefighter.

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The chairman of the Fourth of July Celebration Committee, Laura Carleton, reports that after 3 strenuous meetings of her committee of 9, plans are well along for our great annual day. As in recent years the focus will be primarily on the parade, in which 5 marching bands and 2 flat-bed bands will take part. There will also be 4 militia groups, fire companies as customary from all over Plymouth County and an antique car section plus a new addition in the form of a classic car display.

Early in the morning, FarFars will sponsor the traditional road race and on July 2 the Committee is inviting the entire town to a picnic at Train Field to kindle interest in the celebration. This picnic harks back to right after the turn of the century when what -- then called "Duxbury Days" were held, foretelling future events. Records show that in 1909 a picnic was held for 2 days or so with a band concert, sports events for the young, a fireman's muster and a baseball game.

The 1989 parade theme is "Broadway Here We Come" and many town organizations are gearing up with blueprints for floats. The committee feels that things are looking good for one of the greatest celebrations we have ever held. The town fathers (and one mother) have decided that despite our budget crunch calling for an override of \$1,000,000, the price of the celebration should not be cut. I asked Laura if in a time of austerity budgets she didn't feel this should also be cut and she said, "Certainly not. This is the only town-wide community event involving all sections of the town and all classes of people and I think it is well worth this modest price. Some others think so too, as many have sent contributions to add to that amount. Even so, we don't have enough to do the job we would like to do. We are hoping people who enjoy this day will send us more help -- my telephone number is 934-5353."

The 6th grade at DIS is doing some research on the history of the celebration and some time before the end of the school year will seek to dramatize it and hopefully to stir up interest in the event. Some of them came to see me with their pads and pencils and I had a delightful time recalling earlier July 4th celebrations. As I recall they were tumultuous days. No one knows how or why they took the form they did but one historian suggests it was the response of the young to the senseless slaughter and destruction of lives and property that occurred in World War I, the "war to end wars." They went along with the disillusionment of that catastrophic cataclysm

depicted in the movies "What Price Glory" and "The Big Parade." Whatever the background motivation, it was a real blast.

As fire chief, my father would alert all firehouses (there were 5 of them at the time) and man them for the entire night. Long before this he would caution citizens to clean all piles of trash or brush as these would be targets. These were the greatest problem. But there were other things, such as unlocking pasture gates and releasing animals to roam the streets. A favorite stunt was to turn over privies (wooden box type of outhouses in the days before indoor plumbing). Another stunt was to switch house signs and street signs and remove fences. I remember waking up one 4th of July morning to find a neighbor's fence and gate across the end of our driveway. My brother Henry had lost a wooden barge in a blow that he was using in the construction of Pilgrim Village. It had landed on a Bay Rd. marsh so badly banged up it was no longer seaworthy and it was a great expense to cut up and remove. So a gang burned it up. There were these kind of pranks which were done for fun with minimum damage to property. Such "wilding" as youths do today was beyond limits. There was even a Robin Hood quality when if neighbors were feuding, property items such as porch furniture would be switched and people at odds would be forced to confront one another.

The greatest July 4th stunt took place on 2 successive July 4th nights in 1921 and 1922 when a group of teenagers rowed out from the present Bumpus Park and set fire to Parker Hall's schooner, the *George R. Smith*, lying at anchor there for some 4 or 5 years. As it was high tide it could burn only to the water line. Next July 4 they walked out at low tide and completed the destruction down to the knees and keel that can be discerned there in the mud today. No one knows for sure but these youngsters may have felt the ship was rotting to pieces and no great loss anyway, but the town of course was outraged. What this had to do with the change in the celebration of the 4th is anyone's guess. Suffice it to say that Parker Hall discovered the names of the culprits, went to their fathers exacting \$1,000 a piece on the promise they would not be taken to court and that ended it.

It is the record that approximately in the mid-thirties a group of Duxbury stalwarts, among them Richard Arnold, Waldo Kennard, Eben Briggs and Ralph Thompson, then living at the corner beyond Bumpus Park, gathered some citizens together who felt the time had come to try to channel the youthful

plus the elimination of public sale of fireworks made a very different kind of July 4th celebration.

One person who was really pleased over these eliminations was Howard Blanchard, for a dozen years Duxbury's fire chief and a life-long firefighter. Howard and I talked at the Duxbury Yacht Club where he is now custodian and maintenance man. We shared many things including the fact that I had his job 2 summers while I was in college when it was more like being a club steward not requiring the skills he exhibits today. Howard remembers these "Duxbury Days" well even though he was a very small lad at the time. He remembers paying a penny to pound a nail through a board with one blow.

So Duxbury returned to the parade as their chief focus in celebration with citations for the best floats and a wind up at Train Field with sports events, a baseball game and often a fireman's muster. Now, however, there was something else added to the sport of the parade. It was what came to be known as the "Horribles." These consisted of old wrecks of cars revitalized to snake and drag along the road belching out quantities of smoke and emitting sounds like the cannonading of Fort Sumter. A prize was given to the most ingenious and imaginative rejuvenating job. The older the wreck and the most decrepit but still moveable won the prize. I remember these well and the fun we all had in watching these skeletons of former greatness slide along with squirts, grunts and blasts of black pollution that you could hear coming a hundred yards away and choke on the smell for half an hour after they had passed. I know I am wrong to put this down in print, but I really hated to see them omitted. Perhaps it recalled to mind the days I used to scrape out the carbon and grind the valves of our Chevrolet pick-up and heard a shout from Father that he needed it right away. In my haste I misplaced all the wires with understandable consequences resembling any July 4th celebration. I do have to agree in sober second thought and mature reflection that the "Horribles" had to go the way of the bonfire and fireworks if we were to follow the slogan now heard on every side "Have A Safe and Sane Fourth." The Registry of Motor Vehicles and its demand for safe cars on public highways gave the "old time" Fourth the final coup-de-grace. Now especially we are indeed looking forward to a "Safe and Sane Fourth," with even last year's attempted bonfire a valuable lesson.

All of us oldtimers will lament the omission of risky events of past years. I will miss my days watching the #1 fire truck dart out with its sirens sounding in the clear night air. People will long for the early Duxbury Days when the town's coffers received a lift we certainly could use today. Many will miss the

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roar and flames of the bonfire shooting far above the tree tops. But on the whole, these are good "misses." Duxbury Days events ended in tragedy but its cheap gambling dens and amusements were an embarrassment to Duxburyites who think of their town as a cut above these things. The absence of "Horribles" leaves our air a little cleaner in these days of

ecological sensitivity and we do look forward to a grand celebration in 1989. There is one more thing -- perhaps the absence of these noise and pollution makers can help us focus on the real meaning of this day, our birthday as a nation.

Most nations celebrate the birth of their nation with a single event like the Fall of the Bastille in Paris on July 14, 1789. (France is planning a stupendous celebration this year -- its 200th birthday.) Other nations celebrate the birth of their king or queen as the British Empire remembers Queen Victoria's birthday on May 24. China and Russia both celebrate a day of military victory. China, Oct. 1 in 1949 and Russia the same day in 1917. America uniquely celebrates a day of a declaration of a set of principles in human relations -- responsibilities of citizens to one another, their government and the governments responsibility to them. "All men are created equal and entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and government is set up to guarantee these for its citizens. It is worth pondering that militarily speaking America was being defeated almost everywhere and that the tide of war only turned at the Battle of Saratoga, NY, on Oct. 7, 1777, which persuaded the French Prime Minister, Vergennes, to swing his cabinet over to a declaration of war against their ancient enemy, England, and achieve revenge for the loss of North America in 1763, by wresting away her American colonies.

In a word, the celebration we are holding is a statement of faith in a declaration of principles and the victory of these principles over all who would oppose them. It was principally Abraham Lincoln who set the date of July 4 as our national holiday because he knew our strength as a nation and our survival as a community of divergent peoples depended on our adherence to these principles. Nations emerging from oppression all over the world have tried to emulate our example.

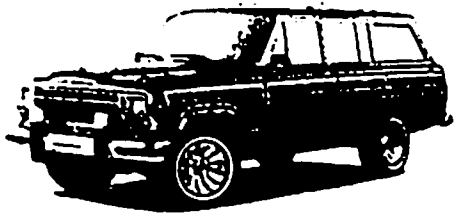
Around Town



ment ceremonies held in the Hynes Convention Center. Dizzy Gillespie, internationally renowned jazz recording artist, received the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Music during the graduation exercises. The Honorary Doctorate also

went to 3-time Grammy Award winning Beatles producer and co-founder of the world famous AIR Studios, George Martin, who in his role as principal speaker addressed the largest graduating class in the history of the college.

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